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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to present a common sense proposal, as opposed to a documented proposal, arguing for the adoption of a periodic communication audit procedure in organizations. The paper presents an approach and information the communication consultant can utilize in addressing management practitioners on the topic: "Why Audit Communication in Your Organization?" It does not furnish a communication audit procedure, but simply proposes a rationale for adopting such a procedure. (Author)

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WHY AUDIT COMMUNICATION IN ORGANIZATIONS?

by

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PROLOGUE

The Setting

You are in a meeting with the general manager (or the like) of a business organization. You were invited to drop by and discuss the topic of "organizational communication" by this particular manager after he heard you give a presentation on organizational communication at a local civic luncheon. During your "chat" in the manager's office, he reveals that his organization is not achieving the levels of effectiveness necessary for continued growth. After probing into various areas, you inquire as to whether the organization has considered auditing its communication as a constructive approach to the problems at hand.

At this particular point, you are encouraged to elaborate. The manager asks, "What do you mean, a u d[redacted] communications?"

THE RESPONSE

You realize, after observing the manager's apparent interest, that the nature of your response will be the important factor in the manager's decision to consider the communication audit for his organization. You don't want to sound preachy or "white towerish", however, you do want to make your point forcefully. Perhaps if you could develop the whole idea of the communication audit in a manner parallel to an organizational procedure the manager already understands and accepts?

The content of your response, then, might well include the following type of information, personalizing it, of course, to your own particular situation and experiences with communication audits. (You begin your response to the manager's question.)

The Objective

The immediate objective of my comments is to promote the use of the communication audit as a means of assessing many aspects of organizational effectiveness. Financial audits have long been with us, personnel and management audits are becoming more familiar to all of us.

The Ambiguity of the Term "Communication"

It appears that a lot of discussion, research and statements such as, "We ought to do something about...." proceed the adoption of any process or procedure of organizational development. Such is the case in the area of organizational communication--the study and practice of communicating within the organization. Firms, such as yours, have begun to realize the limitations of the patch and defend approach to organizational communication. The demands for increased efficiency and effectiveness within organizations necessitate that we begin to view communication in its totality within the organizational setting.

You may be asking yourself, "What does he mean by communication?... That's an ambiguous term to me." I believe the ambiguity of the term communication comes partially from people using the term as if it were completely synonymous with the terms "management", "administration", or the like. From this perspective, communication is never concretely identified for purposes of evaluation or improvement, nor is the relationship between communication and management specified clearly. On the

other hand, if communication is viewed as the process (vehicle) by which people work with and through others to accomplish organizational objectives, we have begun to operationalize (make visible and measureable) communication methods, techniques, activities, channel utilization, hardware, etc. that are drawn upon or used in our planning, organizing, delegating, directing/controlling, and developing. What communication is for a given organization, then, is not totally determined by the researcher, the practitioner, or the theorist. Communication is what it is operationalized to be for each individual group or organization. Clear or ambiguous, this is where we must begin.

I will develop the idea of organizational communication and the communication audit more concretely in a bit. First, allow me to describe five specific reasons why most organizations do not have more adequate communications than they do.

Dysfunctional Approaches to Communication in the Organization

A lack of organizational effectiveness or a desire for increased effectiveness is usually the primary motive behind an organization's decision to audit (assess and correct) its communication. (As in the 50's and 60's, communication is still identified by management as one of the major causes of organizational problems.) If an organization has not previously taken a look at its overall communication before, it may not be sure what to look at or for. The following organizational conditions or states can be identified as the most frequently occurring communication difficulties related to decreased organizational effectiveness.

A. Lack of insight into what is and what is not communication within the organization. There appears to be a fundamental inability of some organizations to differentiate among communication problems, technical/skill problems, and information processing problems.

B. Taking a solution orientation to communication difficulties rather than a problem orientation. Taking an aspirin does not get rid of the flu virus, it simply acts to temporarily reduce the symptoms. In a similar line of thinking, I recall one particular organization that cancelled its staff meetings because more time was spent raising questions than answering them. Another example of this kind of thinking can be seen when all mid-management or supervisory personnel are required to participate in some kind of "canned" communication training program. Why? To improve operations. How? Umm...not too sure.

C. Treating information processing and communication as one in the same. Though many organizations claim they know the difference between communication and information processing, many don't treat the two differently. Sending and receiving memos, holding meetings, listening to presentations does not necessarily mean communication has taken place to the degree intended. THE GREATEST ENEMY OF EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION IS THE MERE ASSUMPTION THAT IT HAS HAPPENED.

D. Few executives, managers, department heads, offices, divisions, etc. have a functionally accurate picture of how others see them as message sources. Source credibility of the message or information source is considered by many communication experts to be the primary factor which can determine the acceptance or rejection of an intended "communication." Yet most administrators or organizations have made little or no effort to determine their credibility as message or information sources with their various publics.

E. Communication improvements in the organization do not keep up with the increased demands for effective communication due to the tremendous growth of technological and procedural advancements. Many organizations are not aware of the auto-catalyzing effects of improved information processing, due to data processing and computerization. This means that when increased amounts of information are made available greater needs develop to use that information. With this increased demand for more and more information comes the increased difficulty of communicating about that information. The more specialized the information that is produced, the more difficult it is for others in the organization to communicate about that information.

Given some or all of the dysfunctional conditions I have just mentioned, it is not difficult to understand why communication problems appear everywhere and in many forms in even the best organizations. A consistent result of these conditions is the defensive stance management takes in regards to in-house communications. What we need is an operational communication system which keeps management in an offensive position.

The Communication Audit and Organizational Communication

As I have mentioned, it is unwise to discuss the reasons for implementing a communication audit before explaining what is meant by the expression "communication audit." The benefits to be obtained from a communication audit cannot be specified without a clear indication as to the area of audit, and the significance of those areas to the effectiveness of the organization, and my experience indicates that this is not always obvious.

So, I would like to take a little time to explain what is meant by a communication audit. This should allow us to think in the same channels. In addition, it will bring out the fact that different managers have different perceptions of the communication function in organizations. It is possible to think of organizational communication in terms of networks, policies, and activities, and to use these concepts to control the organizational communication system and thereby to improve the level of organizational effectiveness.

In the expression "communication audit," I think we can assume that the noun "audit" is well understood to mean examination, checking, analysis reporting, and correction. The popularity of financial audits has led most managers to a general understanding of an audit, though the exact scope of a financial audit is subject to uncertainties.

In recent years we have seen the increasing popularity of other types of audit, such as personnel audits, marketing audits, and management audits. In general, then, the sophisticated manager does know what an audit is, and I believe that this general conception of the nature of an audit has been adopted in our term "communication audit." The problem is therefore not with the word "audit", but rather with the kind of audit, namely that we are concerned with an audit of communication.

What is the scope of such an audit? What are the communication processes of an organization? What will be audited? Do we mean that we will examine the fundamental interaction processes of speaking, writing, listening, and reading abilities of the organization members? Or, are we talking primarily from a technological viewpoint, and will we proceed to a thorough examination of the hardware of the communication system in the form of telephones, switchboards, telex terminals, dictation equipment, duplicating equipment, and computer units?

In general, the manager thinks of communication in organizations in terms of interpersonal speech activities, written reports and in-house publications, and telephonic technology. Sometimes, the concept of communication will include information systems and the kind of interpersonal relations emphasized by organization development agents; and seldom will it be associated with non-verbal human behavior.

Therefore, it is most important to be specific about our concept of the scope of communication in organizations, so it is more clear as to what is being audited.

We take the point of view that communication is a major functional activity in an organization and ultimately will be recognized in the same manner as production, marketing, finance, research, and personnel and that is, should be planned, organized, and controlled in a manner that is considered appropriate in these other functional areas. For present purposes, it may be useful to think of the communication function as being handled by the staff activity of Personnel.

The communication system is considered to be the sum of a group of subsystems or communication networks, each of which is related to one or more organizational goals. We call these networks (1) Regulative Network, (2) Innovative Network, (3) Integrative-Maintenance Network, and (4) Informative-Instructive Network. These networks can be briefly defined as follows:

(1) Regulative Network: relates to the organizational goal of securing the effective coordination and functioning of operations.

(2) Innovative Network: relates to the organizational goal of being adaptive (offensively and defensively) to internal and external influences.

(3) Integrative-Maintenance Network: relates to the organizational goal of providing personal fulfillment and securing high morale for all personnel.

(4) Informative-Instructive Network: relates to the organizational goal of processing information which is essential to other goal attainments, including the three communication networks listed above.

Communication policies then are the strategic plans of communication designed for specific communication networks in order to achieve organizational goals via specially instituted communication activities. That is, the policies that relate to each of the communication networks are implemented through communication activities, and these policies are the basic organization policies expressly stated, or implicitly derived.

This kind of view of the communication function in organizations is very inclusive. In fact, it should be construed to include all behavior-modifying stimuli, both verbal and non-verbal. It includes gestures, facial expressions, symbols and signs in addition to speech, written communication, and the hardware relative thereto. It requires an understanding of the individual, groups, and inter-group relations.

Undeniably, this involves a great amount of detail, and one must not bite off more than he can chew. We are mindful of that and have been approaching this field of work very carefully, with our share of mistakes. But we have had some interesting results. For example, look at Exhibit I. You will note that the communication activities of an organization have been classified in terms of two factors, (1) the number of participants (i.e., whether interpersonal, small-group, or organization-wide) and (2) communication network objectives (i.e., whether regulative, innovative, integrative-maintenance, or informative-instructive). Of course, this is only one way of representing the communication system. There are many variations in this approach that we can employ, as they appear applicable. However, you will note that this starts to furnish a methodology by which we can examine, analyze, criticize and correct the communication elements in an organization.

Organizational Communication and the Objectives of Management

We generally prefer to map out the entire communication system of an organization, in accordance with the concepts I have mentioned, and then to work deeper into some of the major communication activities, as appears advisable. This gives us a chance to see the overall picture and also allows a judgment as to the qualitative nature of the individual activities. It permits attention to the interpersonal aspects in person-to-person interaction, as well as in group meetings; and furnishes much of the data that is necessary for an information-decision system analysis. Yes, and most important, it allows us to judge the presence or absence of controls relative to the communication function.

EXHIBIT I

INTERNAL VERBAL COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES
CLASSIFIED BY NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS AND COMMUNICATION NETWORK OBJECTIVES

Number of Participants	Regulative Network	Innovative Network	Integrative-Maintenance Network	Informative-Instructive Network
INTER-PERSONAL (2 persons)	- Supervisor directions and requests. - Supervisor-Subordinate appraisal meetings. - Job descriptions and standards. - Annual appraisal. - Special problem sessions. - Reports on operations. - Memoranda.	- Ad hoc problem resolution. - Supervisor-Subordinate idea development meetings. - Annual goals determination in work-planning program. - Informal get-togethers as in-house lunch meeting. - Reports on visits to other organization, conventions, seminars.	- President's welcome letter to new employee. - Grievance discussion. - Progress review in work-planning program. - Annual appraisal. - Informal meeting of two organization members. - Superior-subordinate informal conversation on personal matters.	- Hiring interview. - New employee orientation - Memoranda. - Oral and written report - Cross-functioning.
SMALL-GROUP (3-10 persons)	- Meetings: directors, executive committee, departmental; crisis-type meeting as in fire, flood, strike.	- Meetings: directors, executive committee, departmental, inter-departmental, problem-solving, sales development, crisis-type, budget, group lunch.	- Meetings: participative workgroup, interdepartmental, coffee-break, group lunch.	- Meetings. - Training in small group
ORGANIZATION WIDE	- Organization plans. - Policy statements. - Standard procedures. - Regulations. - Union contract. - Chart of organization. - Staff memos. - Organization chart.	- Suggestion program. - Problem-finding program - Operations audit reports as to general and specific areas of the organization.	- In-house publications. - Holiday social function. - "The Grapevine". - Literature available to personnel concerning plans, etc. - President's talk to all employees. - Supervisory staff meeting.	- In-house publications. - Bulletin-board notices - Staff meetings. - Employee information booklets. - Benefits brochure. - Statements of standard procedures. - Union contract. - Organization policy statements. - "The Grapevine".

Naturally, you are interested in the usefulness of this kind of an approach for your organization. We realize that. As you have heard, we are not advocating that you set out to improve public speaking or reading ability in your organization. We are recommending that you assign staff to the examination of the communication activities of your organization, and to the determination as to whether they are adequate to the job of achieving objectives. We see objectives in terms of task-performance, social responsibilities, completion of plans, adaptability to change, and productivity; and we look for the presence or absence of the implementative communication activities relative thereto. In addition, we are concerned with the qualitative sufficiency of these activities that do exist. We believe that explicit communication policies are important for the achievement of organizational objectives; and these policies require implementation via carefully developed communication activities that seek to achieve satisfactory levels of performance.

I know that my statements have still been very general and not too specific to this point, but let me give you an example of what we have run across in the recent past. I will try to mention findings that are of a type that might be found anywhere, including in your organization.

The Results of a Communication Audit

What are the specific results of the communication audit? This may be a question in your mind. Of course, the specific details of an answer to this question will depend on the organization. Generally, we can say conclude that the organization invariably discovers something about its communication that it was not previously aware of. Let me give you a specific example that I feel is quite representative.

I was fortunate to participate in a communication audit of a large public health organization. Prior to the audit, the administration and employees were encouraged to predict what would be discovered. The administration predicted that the communication audit would reveal the primary problem areas as working conditions. (The building that housed the regular staff offices and patient services was extremely old and over-crowded.) The more vocal employees (seen as "chronic bitchers" by the administration) predicted the primary problem would appear as poor administrative communication. To the surprise of all, the number one problem area was identified by administration and staff alike as a "lack of information concerning the overall operations of the whole organization." Many believed that they could not perform their jobs effectively because of this lack of information.

Corrective steps were taken, and the next audit (approximately one year later) revealed among other things (a) higher morale and job satisfaction by staff, (b) higher quality of work as seen by the administrators, and (c) higher scores for administration from staff. The most frequent explanations for these results were that problems were being identified and something was being done about them. The process of doing the communication audits apparently had something to do with better perceived operations.

Briefly, the most consistent conclusion from a communication audit is that a wide gap exists between how certain individuals, offices, groups, etc., see the communication problems and how other individuals, offices, groups, etc., see the communication problems. Differences exist in what are considered to be;

a. work objectives

b. communication problem areas

c. solutions to the problems

The greatest benefits toward increased organizational effectiveness that result from the communication audit procedure come when the audit is used in a consistent manner and on a regular basis whether there is a crisis or not. We do not run our financial audits on a one shot basis or just when we are in trouble. We run our financial audits periodically and continue to build an operational base of information from which we can make better and better predictions (projections) about the future.

The Proposal

The step towards this condition may sound simplistic and common sense by description. As I have stated, organizations need to find out at what level of effectiveness their communication systems are operating. In few words, I am proposing that an organization such as yours set up an operational and ongoing communication audit procedure somewhat analogous to the financial audit. The communication audit will significantly improve the organization's track record in predicting and handling communication activities within the organization. The use of an ongoing communication audit will allow the organization, for the first time, to begin to see the critical relationships between communication effectiveness and organizational effectiveness.

What I am proposing is not unlike your financial audit system, which you could probably not live without; but you are a much more operational sound organization because of your financial audit procedures. The financial audit allows you to keep track of and manage the cash flow. The financial audit provides the foundation from which the organization;

a. evaluates its past operations

b. analyzes its present operations

c. sets future operational goals

SUCH IS THE CASE WITH THE COMMUNICATION AUDIT.

Additional Benefits of the Communication Audit:

Additional benefits that normally result from the utilization of a communication audit on a regular basis have proven to be numerous and varied depending on the particular organization. The following benefits may be of particular interest to your organization.

A. The use of the communication audit allows the organization to take an offensive stance in its communication revitalization rather than a defensive, patchwork approach.

B. The information resulting by the communication audit will provide the organization with a foundation of accurate knowledge from which to choose among the various alternatives for organizational growth and development, i.e., information processing, structural re-organization, operational procedures, etc. Much of the guess work will be eliminated in selecting appropriate training programs for both communication and technical effectiveness. The organization will have a problem orientation rather than a solution orientation. Potential solutions to communication problems can be matched against the identified needs so as to maximize gains with a minimum of effort.

C. The organization will be able to adapt an operational approach to communication and at the same time determine precisely what is communication in their organization.

D. The organization will know more about the communication "credibility" of various individuals, offices, divisions, etc. within the organization. This will assist the organization in choosing the most effective sources of future communication. It will also permit the organization to "work on" its credibility in weak areas.

E. Finally, communication improvements will, for the first time, have at least a chance at keeping up with the increased demands for effective communication. (It should be noted that the use of the communication audit will not automatically bring the organization's communication up with present needs. An extra effort will have to be taken to do this. However, the gap between communication practices and communication needs of the organization should be closed considerably. How much depends on the effort of the particular organization.

Well, that is my conceptualization of the nature and purpose of the communication audit. I will stop here, as I see time is running short for both of us.

EPILOGUE

The manager nods his head in silence for a few moments after you finish speaking. It is as if he is contemplating an idea he has. Then he responds:

> "I think I see what you are getting at. Very interesting idea. I'll tell you what, I want to talk this over with my management staff. If they are interested, would you be available to come and address the entire group on the topic of the communication audit?"

Your response is affirmative. After a few parting comments regarding the arrangements for a possible presentation, you leave the manager's office. On your way out of the building you reflect to yourself:

"He (the manager) is not actually jumping up and down with enthusiasm, but he did appear to be quite interested in the possibilities of the communication audit. If he swings some weight with his staff, and it looks like he does, I will have crossed the first and biggest barrier which usually appears in the form of the question, "Why should we audit communications within our organization?"

So my presentation to the management staff should first capsulize what I have covered today with the manager. They will want more information and specifics than that though. I will be ready to go into the second major area, spelling out how the communication audit could proceed in their organization, from beginning to end...

a. designing the audit
b. administering the audit
c. analysis and utilization of audit results."